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WOMEN'S ROLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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WOMEN'S ROLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

by

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PREFACE

For some period of time, I have been engaged in studying the political attitudes and behavior of American women. The principal focus of my attention has been directed toward investigating the effects of work, education and marriage on the political role of women in America. What follows is a brief report of several conclusions that I have reached at this stage of my investigations about the effects of two of those three factors. Thereafter, there is a selected bibliography on the topic.

The bibliographical listings were selected to include a variety of types of subjects within the overall field of female political attitudes and behavior. It includes citations of the limited amount of literature specifically directed to studies of female political behavior. There are citations for works in the general field of political behavior in America. These are included because of their references to the female segment of the citizenry, and their discussions that provide the background for understanding the varying types and degrees of participation by women. Other citations are listed which provide the background for understanding the

political role of American women. These include studies of the political socialization effects of the family, and of the overall attitudes relating to the multi-roles of women in America. An attempt was made to include those works which show how the roles have been affected by increased rates of females entering into institutions of higher learning and into the job market. Though several leading works about the women's liberation movement are included, I have not intended this effort to be a compendium of arguments for, against or about the movement, per se.

The bibliography emphasizes scholarly writings. This was a deliberate choice because my orientation has been two-fold: First, to demonstrate the types and diversity of topics that have been reported on the basis of research; and, secondly, in the hopes of encouraging further substantive research. Popular journalistic articles - while contributing worthwhile and often amusing perspectives - have, thus, intentionally been avoided. While the list includes works published throughout the twentieth century, it emphasizes those works of the last two decades. It, thus, has been designed to indicate the changing social, political and economic roles that affect the women in the "man's world" of politics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have to be recognized for their assistance throughout my investigation. Two, in particular, were outstanding guides in earlier stages of my studies (though all subsequent personal shortcomings cannot be attributed to them): Dr. James W. Prothro, University of North Carolina, and Dr. Franklin L. Burdette, University of Maryland. The staff members of the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, University of Michigan, were most helpful and generous in providing the data and in giving related information.

In writing about women in America, I must acknowledge those special people who have given me insight into the multi-facets of women's roles. Loving tribute is given to Mary Levitt, Florence Rose, and Eleanor Feldbaum. At this time, however, it is to Harriett Mizrachi that this work is dedicated.

THE EFFECTS OF WORK AND EDUCATION ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF AMERICAN WOMEN

The Political Role

Any study on the female political role -- that which the suffragettes labored to make an integral part of women's life in American society -- must begin with a confrontation of the image that "women's place is in the home." That image prevailed in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was

ratified, and, to some degree, prevails still.

The beginnings of such an assignment to a domestic, subjective position has been said to have occurred ages ago:

> The prolonged slavery of woman in the darkest page in human history. A survey of the condition of the race through those barbarous periods, when physical force governed the world, when the motto, "might makes right," was the law, enables one to account for the origin of woman's subjection to man without referring the fact to the general inferiority of the sex, or Nature's law.[1]

Be that as it may. This author feels that any role assignment in society is a product of three types of classifying action: one whereby the actors of one group are placed by other actors of another group, a second whereby the actors are placed by other actors in their own group, and a third whereby the actors place themselves. The stereotyped image of "woman's place is in the home" may, therefore, not be considered as produced by men alone, for women have acquiesced.

The acquiescence may be seen in the political attitudes held by American women. My studies have thusfar seen evidence that women are less interested in politics, and that they are less involved in the political process than are men, who are their equals in the mechanical "eyes" of the voting machine.

Women's record of turnout at the polls has been inferior to that of men in the past five decades. Why women vote less often than men has been one of the major questions of my

research. Women believe that they ought to vote, that is, they generally rate high on responding to items of a citizen obligation scale that measures attitudes about discharging one's civic duties. However, this belief is apparently overshadowed by their frustration in feeling that they are less than equal members of the American society; for they hold beliefs that their political activity is not worthwhile. The latter point is a conclusion based on responses to items on a political efficacy scale that measures attitudes about the possible impact one feels she may have on the political process.

Women also refrain from participation in the political process because they perceive pressure against their entering into fields of activity that are considered masculine. Such restraint, apparently, may stem from low levels of self-confidence or apathy caused by membership in a perceived inferior group.

The Effects of Work and Education

The traditional roles of women as wives and mothers may shape their political role. An observer of the first elections in which all American women had the legal right to vote noted that:

> The institutions of matrimony and motherhood condem the great bulk of women to an economic dependence impossible to escape and which has been the female lot since there were females. It is the inevitable accompaniment of the part they play in the propagation of their species. Some of them by by failing for one reason or another to play this role for which they were by nature intended, escape this economic dependence but for the majority there is no such escape, which most of them distinctly do not.[2]

A turn-of-the-century suffragette stated that women must escape, for

> the isolated household is responsible for a large share of woman's ignorance and degradation. A mind always in contact with children and servants, whose aspirations and ambitions rise no higher than the roof which shelters it, is necessarily dwarfed in its proportions.[3]

More recently, Eleanor French has noted that the concentration of women's lives as primarily home centered, may have contributed to making politics seem remote. Men's lives, she wrote,

> in contrast to women's develop outside the home. The factors with which a man must reckon in his daily activities are often the result of politics. The particular candidates elected to office, the taxes ... the business regulations fixed by government, all can have a bearing on the success or failure of an enterprise.[4]

What, then, would be the effects of women leaving the confinement of the home? Surely the widened contacts made through employment and broadened knowledge gained through the formal education process offer a less restricted viewpoint towards the political process and a greater tendency to participate. Education enlarges the dimensions of one's

ability to think, and frees the mind from bondages of authority and oppression. Work facilitates contacts with others leading to the interchange of ideas, as well as to securing the funds to support formal educational pursuits. It is important, therefore, to study the effects of work and education on political attitudes and activities -- for each may ultimately affect the levels of knowledge and experience related to the maintenance of and deviation from the myths, images, and stereotypes of the woman's role.

This report presents some observations of these effects on women's political attitudes and role, based upon an analysis of data gathered in a series of nation-wide sample surveys of the American citizenry of voting age (between 1956-1968), by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan.

I have classified the female respondents into two groups: "Working women," and house women" (i.e., those who are not employed outside the home). In testing for rates of participation of women in the political process, it was found that working women participate to a greater degree than do house women. A review of voting behavior patterns, for example, show this to be true. When education is controlled, the differences in the rate of voting between the two groups of women are reduced, as the level of education increases, but do not disappear. The stereotype of the woman's place in the homeis maintained more at the lowest education level.

The same patterns found in the voting behavior of the female groups remained constant when testing for the extent of participation in various political campaign activities. Working women contributed money, time, and effort to political parties or candidates at a greater degree than did house women.

A higher rate of political discussion was found among working women than among the other female group. Though in this activity, more than in any other, education appears to have a great effect (for at the college level the rates of difference between the female groups disappear), it does not appear to be as strong as the work factor. Women who work have greater opportunity to talk politics with a wider selection of men (who are traditionally the more politically oriented group) than those who stay home. This opportunity undoubtedly contributed to the greater participation rate of the working women.

Working women, I have found, are more interested in politics than are house women. With education controlled, though interest generally increases, the differences in the degrees of interest between the two female groups does not disappear. Working women appear to be more interested in following politics between campaigns than are house women. However, as the different rates of such interest narrows with increased education, it may be inferred that for this type

of political attention, education is more important a factor than is contacts gained through the work experience. Education further appears to be an important factor for heightening women's exposure to campaign communications.

The effect of entering the man's world, by working, was demonstrated as the more important factor in two areas closely connected with political participation. Working womeh feel that their participation is more worthwhile than do house women, and they, more than the house women, have a greater sense of citizen obligation in believing that they ought to participate in the political process. The scores of the two female groups on political efficacy and citizen obligation scales generally increase with higher levels of education, but the differences of the scores between each group have not been seen to disappear when education is controlled.

Conclusion. The central premise of my studies has been that women who entered the so-called man's world of work and education (two fields in which men have dominated, and which are hypothesized as being important in developing political attitudes) would be more politically active, involved, and feel more effective in the political aspect of American society than would those who did not. If that proposition were valid, it would be expected that a contrast would develop between the two groups of women, so defined, with those who were not isolated in the home being more "malelike" politically.

This contrast did appear. But, more importantly, when the factors of education and work were controlled in each measure, it appeared that the working experience is a primary factor in affecting the political role of the American women, and that education experience -- important as it may be -- is, in relation, a secondary factor.

Implications

Another look at Mr. Kent's observations will present the pessimistic approach to any view of women becoming more politicized. In noting the stereotyped image of women's role as being strictly fulfilled in the home, he stated that

> there may come a time when this is not true, when the great fact of the economic dependence of women which makes it true will be altered, but unless the human race is to die out there seems no way of escaping that fact. It seems ... the natural and inevitable lot of women. If they are to bear children, rear families and keep house, they cannot very well achieve economic independence too. So long as they lack economic independence of the male, they will lack political independence -- not all of them of course, but always the majority.[5]

The natural and traditional role of women espoused by Mr. Kent, and by most men in the early period of woman suffrage, has been altered over the past five decades -- slowly, to be sure, but inexorably. The economic demands of the world wars made extensive employment of women necessary. Technological and scientific developments have brought numerous home appliances and aids that have reduced time consuming aspects of home making, and these combined with increased

life spans have, in turn, sent still more women into work. Specialized and emergent opportunities in work have, furthermore, increased the number of women who go to complete high school or go on to obtain a higher or a more technical education.

Increased rates of women in the labor force and in the institutions of higher education will, assuredly, alter the female role, with result of a more politically oriented and involved American woman. The idea may give some husbands, or husbands to be, the shudders, but it nevertheless remains highly likely.

This author hopes and expects, with others, that Americans of both sexes will "gradually abandon outdated images of masculinity and femininity without ceasing to rejoice in the difference."[6]

Footnotes

1. Elizabeth C. Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda J. Gage, History of Woman Suffrage. Rochester, New York: Susan B. Anthony, 1887, I. 13.

2. Frank R. Kent, Political Behavior. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1928, pp. 282-283.

3. Stanton, History of Woman Suffrage, p. 21

4. Eleanor C. French, "Key Political Force -- The Ladies," The New York Times Magazine, March 11, 1956, p. 14 ff.

5. Kent, Political Behavior, p. 288.

6. Ellen and Kenneth Keniston, "An American Anachronism: The Image of Women and Work," The American Scholar, XXXIII, Summer, 1964, pp. 371-372.

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